

# Trauma Talk: When Children Talk About Their Traumatic Experiences

## I. Introduction

- A. Presenter-Marisol H. Tobey; Licensed Mental Health Counselor at Kids House of Seminole, Inc.
- B. Time-1 hour
- C. <http://www.qpiflorida.org/justintime/pages/topicindex.html>

## II. Objectives

- A. Provide general guidelines for communicating with children
- B. Define trauma and the impact it may have on behaviors
- C. Review characteristics of each developmental stage
- D. Provide specific guidelines on ways to communicate with children of different ages.
- E. Offer example of helpful responses
- F. Offer tips on ways to include other children in the home
- G. Discuss impact on caregivers.

## III. Presentation

- A. General Guidelines when talking with children
  - 1. "Catch" the feeling-validate (Heart to heart; "that sounds...")-feels understood
  - 2. Empathy-understanding or trying to feel what other person is feeling
  - 3. Open ended questions-limit "why"- "How did that make you feel?"
  - 4. Honor the space
    - a. Create safe space
    - b. Tremendous courage shown to share traumatic experiences
  - 5. Stay Calm-it is not about you
  - 6. Encourage more communication-("Thank you for trusting me"- "Like to hear more when you feel...")
    - a. Journals / Thank you notes
    - b. Way to share things between you and child; put in a safe place
- B. Trauma
  - 1. It is an emotional shock or wound having a long lasting effect on a person's wellbeing
    - a. Completely individualized experience (can't assume event traumatized person)
  - 2. Children who are traumatized may function at a younger developmental stage (does not mean developmentally delayed)
  - 3. Every person's experience is their own
  - 4. Communicating about traumatic experiences is different than communicating about other things-differences are the effect it has on the brain.

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## C. Trauma and the Brain

### 1. Parts

- a. Neocortex-outer layer
  - 1. In charge of rational thinking
  - 2. Making plans
- b. Limbic—Middle
  - 1. In charge of emotions
  - 2. Senses-especially smell
- c. Reptilian-
  - 1. Charge of instinct
  - 2. Breathe heart rate, etc.
  - 3. Fight or Flight

## D. Traumatic material activates the limbic and reptilian system

- 1. Neo-cortex is challenged and this material is more difficult to access
  - a. Shuts down
  - b. Lose concept of time and place (remembering feels like reliving-flashback)
  - c. Reacting vs. thinking ("What were you thinking?"-really not thinking)
  - d. Limited ability to rationalize or understand

## E. Talk to me at my level

- 1. Preschoolers (Ages 3-6)
  - a. Play is language
  - b. Sequence of events still a new concept
  - c. Talk about fantasy as if real events
  - d. Symbols and associations very important (metaphors)
  - e. Need to know they are safe and loved
  - f. Narrate the play without any opinions-allow them to give you meaning
  - g. Help identify feelings (mad, sad, scared, glad=derivatives of these feelings)
  - h. Assure that they are not in trouble
- 2. School Age (Ages 6-12)
  - a. Understands sequence of events
  - b. Goal oriented-concrete thinking (black and white)
  - c. Explore reasons for emotions
  - d. Peers become more important (thinking outside of self)
  - e. Need for their feelings and worries to be understood
  - f. Help them identify emotions (offer more feeling words)
  - g. Open ended questions (What happened next?)
  - h. Reflective statements
  - i. Want normalization
  - j. Can begin to ask what makes you feel... (Don't seem happy today...what...)

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3. Teenagers (Ages 12-18)
  - a. Depth of thought-abstract thinking-(sometimes)
  - b. They wish to be understood who they are becoming and what others think/feel about them
  - c. Need for more inclusion in decisions and being informed about adult life
  - d. Begin to understand parents are not perfect
  - e. Not little adults (Brain not fully developed until mid-20s)
  - f. Very sensitive and in need of validation-even if they don't show it
  - g. Reflection of feelings help them identify but also explore how they feel about the experiences
  - h. Fear of being judged / critical
  - i. Hearing your feelings and experiences might enhance relationship-makes them feel like they are understood
  - j. Need to be allowed to learn from mistakes and correct their errors
  - k. Guidelines-say no to lectures
  - l. Encourage more discussions by asking less questions and reflecting more
  - m. Your tone and body language will speak louder than any words you may say.
- F. For the non-traumatic little ears (other children in the home that heard)
  1. Honesty is the best policy (don't need to get into details-if something happened and they don't understand they will assign meaning.
    - a. Answer honestly and succinctly)
  2. Assure safety and that no one is mad
  3. Do not make promises you cannot keep (ex. Reunification or change of placement, you'll see them again)
- G. What about you?
  1. Do you know your own emotions?
  2. Become familiar with your views about sex
  3. Time out is just not for kids
  4. What do you do with your mads/sads and scaries? (Oxygen mask-open to hearing and taking care of self)
  5. Report new disclosures to child abuse hotline
  6. Important-be honest about having to "tell"
- H. Tolerating the emotional experience gives a message that you can handle what they say and feel it without judgement. It sends the message that they are accepted and loved no matter what.
- I. Children will not tell you stuff if they don't feel safe.